



Aminoacylation of tRNA 2'- or 3'-hydroxyl by phosphoseryl- and pyrrolysyl-tRNA synthetases

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 August 2013

Revised 22 August 2013

Accepted 23 August 2013

Available online 8 September 2013

Edited by Michael Ibba

Keywords:

Protein synthesis

tRNA esterification

Amino acid

ABSTRACT

Class I and II aminoacyl-tRNA synthetases (AARSs) attach amino acids to the 2'- and 3'-OH of the tRNA terminal adenosine, respectively. One exception is phenylalanyl-tRNA synthetase (PheRS), which belongs to Class II but attaches phenylalanine to the 2'-OH. Here we show that two Class II AARSs, O-phosphoseryl- (SepRS) and pyrrolysyl-tRNA (PylRS) synthetases, aminoacylate the 2'- and 3'-OH, respectively. Structure-based-phylogenetic analysis reveals that SepRS is more closely related to PheRS than PylRS, suggesting that the idiosyncratic feature of 2'-OH acylation evolved after the split between PheRS and PylRS. Our work completes the understanding of tRNA aminoacylation positions for the 22 natural AARSs.

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1. Introduction

Aminoacyl-tRNA synthetases (AARSs) are essential enzymes that catalyze the attachment of amino acids to corresponding tRNAs [1]. The resulting aminoacyl-tRNAs (AA-tRNAs) are transported by the elongation factor (EF-Tu in bacteria and EF1A in archaea and eukaryotes) to the ribosome as building blocks for protein synthesis [2,3]. AARSs catalyze formation of AA-tRNAs in two steps at the same active site: activation of the amino acid with ATP to form an aminoacyl-adenylate (AA-AMP), and transfer of the amino acid moiety to the 2'- or 3'-hydroxyl group (OH) of the tRNA terminal adenosine (A₇₆) [1,4]. Based on the active site structure, AARSs are grouped into two independently evolved classes [5]. Class I AARSs all attach amino acids to the 2'-OH of A₇₆, whereas most Class II enzymes aminoacylate the 3'-OH except asparaginyl- (AsnRS) and phenylalanyl-tRNA (PheRS) synthetases that prefer the 2'-OH [4,6,7].

In solution, the 2'- or 3'-linked amino acid spontaneously transacylates to the neighboring OH at high rates [8], resulting in a mixture of 2'- and 3'-linked AA-tRNA isomers. EF-Tu stabilizes the 3'-isomer, which is preferred by the ribosome during peptide bond formation [9]. The vicinal hydroxyl group plays critical roles in catalyzing peptide bond formation on the ribosome, and hydrolyzing (editing) misacylated tRNAs by several AARSs and *trans*-editing factors [10–13].

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SepRS and PylRS belong to the Class IIc subfamily and are evolutionary related to PheRS [14–17]. Except in mitochondria, PheRS forms (αβ)₂ heterotetramers [18,19]. SepRS is a α₄ homotetramer, and PylRS forms α₂ homodimers [15,17]. SepRS aminoacylates O-phosphoserine (Sep) onto tRNA^{Cys} in several methanogenic archaea, and the resulting Sep-tRNA^{Cys} is then converted to Cys-tRNA^{Cys} by Sep-tRNA:Cys-tRNA synthase [14]. In methanogens and a few anaerobic bacteria, PylRS attaches pyrrolysine (Pyl) onto tRNA^{Pyl} with a CUA anticodon, which decodes in-frame UAG codons [16]. PylRS has been extensively engineered for genetic incorporation of non-canonical amino acids [20–22]. SepRS has also been used to expand the genetic code of *Escherichia coli* with Sep [23]. Here we show that SepRS more closely resembles PheRS and attaches Sep onto the 2'-OH of A₇₆, whereas the more distantly related PylRS aminoacylates the 3'-OH. Structural modeling reveals that the aminoacylation active site of SepRS superimposes well with that of PheRS and that 2'-OH aminoacylation by PheRS and SepRS is presumably an intrinsic feature determined by the active site architecture.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Preparation of tRNA transcripts with 3'-terminal adenosine, 2'-deoxyadenosine or 3'-deoxyadenosine

In vitro T7 RNA polymerase runoff transcripts of *Methanocaldococcus jannaschii* tRNA^{Cys} and *Methanosarcina barkeri* tRNA^{Pyl} were prepared from linearized plasmids as described previously [24]. To

generate tRNA transcripts with a 3'-CC₇₅ end, a *FokI* restriction site was placed in appropriate distance to the 3' end of each tRNA gene sequence. Transcripts were purified on a denaturing 12% polyacrylamide gel, recovered by passive elution in 1 M sodium acetate (pH 6.0), ethanol precipitated, resuspended in double distilled water, desalted on Sephadex G25 Microspin columns (Amersham), and refolded as described [25]. The addition of the 76th nucleotide was achieved by using *E. coli* terminal tRNA nucleotidyl transferase under the following conditions. 20 μ M tRNA CC₇₅ transcript was mixed with 2 mM ATP, 2'-dATP, or 3'-dATP in a reaction buffer containing 50 mM glycine-NaOH (pH 9.0), 10 mM MgCl₂, 7 mM 2-mercaptoethanol, and 1 μ M terminal tRNA nucleotidyl transferase. After 1 h of incubation at 37 °C, tRNA was phenol and chloroform extracted, precipitated, resuspended in double distilled H₂O and desalted on a Sephadex G25 Microspin column. The addition of the modified 3'-terminal adenosine was checked on a 8% denaturing polyacrylamide gel.

2.2. Aminoacylation of tRNA transcripts

The standard reaction mixture (50 μ l) contained 50 mM Hepes-KOH, pH 7.0, 50 mM NaCl, 20 mM MgCl₂, 5 mM dithiothreitol, 10 mM ATP, 200 μ M [¹⁴C]phosphoserine (55 mCi/mmol), 10 μ M tRNA transcript, and 10 μ M purified recombinant *M. maripaludis* SepRS. Radioactive aminoacyl-tRNAs synthesized after 2–45 min were quantified in 9- μ l aliquots as described previously [25].

2.3. Acid urea gel electrophoresis of aminoacyl-tRNA

The aminoacylation of the modified tRNA^{Pyl} transcripts can be assayed by the different mobility shift of the charged and uncharged species on an acid urea gel [16]. The aminoacylation reaction was performed for 90 min at 37 °C in 100 mM Na-Hepes (pH 7.2), 60 mM NaCl, 25 mM MgCl₂, 5 mM ATP, 5 mM DTT, 1 mM pyrrolysine, 2 μ M of 5'-[γ -³²P]ATP labeled modified tRNA^{Pyl} transcript, and 5 μ M *M. barkeri* and 10 μ M *Desulfotobacterium hafniense* PylRS respectively. All reactions were started by addition of the amino acid. The reactions were stopped with 1 volume of 0.3 M sodium acetate (pH 4.5)/10 mM ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid (EDTA). After phenol/chloroform extraction and ethanol precipitation, the aminoacyl-tRNAs were dissolved in 1 \times loading buffer [7 M urea/0.3 M sodium acetate (pH 4.5)/10 mM EDTA/0.1% bromophenol blue/0.1% xylene cyanol] and were loaded onto a 6.5% polyacrylamide gel (50 \times 20 cm, 0.4 mm thick) containing 7 M urea and 0.1 M sodium acetate (pH 5.0). The gel was run at 4 °C, 500 V, in 0.1 M sodium acetate (pH 5.0) for 18 h. Charged and uncharged tRNAs were exposed to phosphorimager plates (FujiFilms), visualized using a Molecular Dynamics Storm 860 scanner (Amersham) [16].

2.4. Structure-based phylogenetic analysis

Protein structures were downloaded from the protein databank or the SCOP database [26] and aligned using Multiseq 2.0 [27]. The tree was calculated from the structural similarity metric QH [28]. The tree was drawn based on the QH distance matrix computed in Multiseq 2.0 using Phylip 3.66 Neighbor and Drawtree programs [29].

3. Results and discussion

To characterize the aminoacylation mechanisms of SepRS and PylRS, we prepared transcripts of tRNA^{Cys} and tRNA^{Pyl} in which the 3'-terminal adenosine was exchanged with 2'- or 3'-deoxyadenosine, and used them as substrates for aminoacylation by

SepRS or PylRS. *M. maripaludis* SepRS charged tRNA^{Cys} with a 3'-deoxyadenosine, but not tRNA^{Cys} without A₇₆ or with a 2'-deoxyadenosine (Fig. 1), suggesting that SepRS attaches Sep onto the 2'-OH of A₇₆. The charging efficiency of tRNA^{Cys} ending with 2'-deoxyadenosine was three times lower compared to transcripts terminally labeled with adenosine, indicating that the 3'-OH group promotes aminoacylation. In contrast, both *M. barkeri* and *D. hafniense* PylRS attaches Pyl only to tRNA transcripts with a 3'-OH group at A₇₆, whereas no aminoacylation at the 2'-OH group was detected (Fig. 2). PylRS thus behaves like a normal Class II AARS charging the 3'-OH of A₇₆, and SepRS resembles PheRS in aminoacylation of the 2'-OH (Fig. 2).

Given the biochemical data, the evolution of 2'-OH can be interpreted in reference to the phylogenetic tree of the class II AARS family (Fig. 3). This protein family is distantly related, and some class II AARSs share only 5% sequence identity. The AARS family tree is, therefore, based on a structural overlap of the available X-ray structures of class II AARSs, and the branch lengths are computed from the structural similarity between the AARS catalytic core domains (as in [28]). The tree indicates that PylRS diverged from a PheRS ancestor perhaps with a 3'-OH preference given that PylRS prefers 3'-OH as do most class II AARSs. Following the divergence of PylRS and PheRS, the PheRS enzyme acquired a 2'-OH preference (Fig. 3, red arrow), which was inherited by SepRS after its later divergence from PheRS. PylRS was predicted [30] to prefer the 2'-OH, based on the close relationship between PylRS, PheRS, and SepRS. The biochemical and phylogenetic data presented here indicate that the 2'-OH preference evolved only after PylRS emerged, which underscores the fact that it is not evident from structure or sequence data why PheRS and SepRS differ in aminoacylation position.

The distinction of AARSs into two classes correlates remarkably with two different modes of amino acid addition to the tRNA. The idiosyncratic acylation position of PheRS is due to a unique mechanism by which it binds the CCA end of the tRNA (Fig. 4A) [31], which allows it to acylate the 2'-OH group of A₇₆. The co-crystal structure of *Thermus thermophilus* PheRS complexed with tRNA^{Phe} and a Phe-AMP analog reveals a tRNA binding state before amino acid transfer (Fig. 4). Neither the 2'- or 3'-OH in the structure is suitably-positioned to attack the phosphodiester bond of Phe-AMP. However, the PheRS:tRNA^{Phe} complex structure (without Phe or Phe-AMP analog) shows that the A₇₆ partially overlaps with the amino acid binding pocket [18], suggesting that substantial

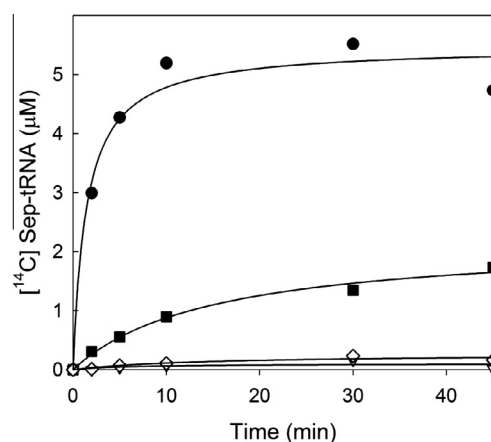


Fig. 1. Site of amino acid attachment in *M. maripaludis* SepRS. Time course of aminoacylation of different tRNA^{Cys} species with Sep using *M. maripaludis* SepRS is shown. The tRNAs were modified at the 3' termini as follows: tRNA lacking the 3'-terminal adenosine (Δ), terminus reconstructed with 3'-deoxyadenosine (■), 2'-deoxyadenosine (◇), and adenosine (●).

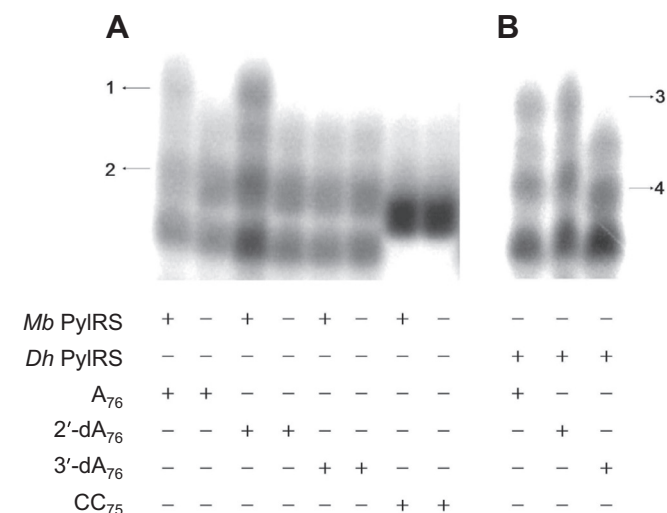


Fig. 2. Analysis of the 3' terminal adenosine modified *M. barkeri* Fusaro tRNA^{Pyl} transcripts charged with pyrrolysine (Pyl) in the presence (+) and absence (–) *M. barkeri* Fusaro PylRS enzyme. The resulting tRNA products were loaded onto an acid gel and the samples were later exposed to a phosphorimager plate. The positions of tRNA^{Pyl} and Pyl-tRNA^{Pyl} are indicated. The lower band is the unmodified tRNA transcripts with a 3'-CC₇₅ end. 1 and 3 indicates the position of Pyl-tRNA^{Pyl}, while 2 and 4 indicates uncharged tRNA^{Pyl}. *Mb*, *Methanosarcina barkeri*; *Dh*, *Desulfotobacterium hafniense*.

movement of A₇₆ occurs upon Phe binding and Phe-AMP formation. Future computational and structural studies (e.g., using non-hydrolyzable Phe-tRNA) might help address the question as to how the 2'-OH of tRNA^{Phe} attack the carbonyl group of Phe.

The SepRS active site superimposes well onto PheRS, and Sep adopts a similar orientation as Phe at the amino acid binding pocket (Fig. 4B). The 3'-end of tRNA^{Sep} is disordered in the SepRS:tRNA^{Sep} complex structure [32], therefore the binding mode of A₇₆ at the active site is unclear at a molecular level. It is suggested that features in the AARS, but not the tRNA, determines the site of aminoacylation at A₇₆ [4]. Not surprisingly, SepRS attaches amino acids to the 2'-OH as PheRS due to the structural similarity.

Structures of PylRS complexed with tRNA^{Pyl} or Pyl have been solved separately [33,34]. Modeling results reveal that the 3'-OH of A₇₆ appears to be 2 Å closer to the carboxyl group of Sep compared with the 2'-OH (Fig. 4C). This is consistent with our observation that 3'-OH is the target of aminoacylation in PylRS, although the molecular mechanism of esterification awaits elucidation.

One puzzling question is why some AARSs aminoacylate the 2'-OH but others choose the 3'-OH. One possible explanation is the requirement for post-transfer editing, a process many AARSs use to hydrolyze misacylated tRNAs [35,36]. PheRS is able to hydrolyze Tyr-tRNA^{Phe} with a fluorine substitution at the 3'-OH of A₇₆, albeit at a lower efficiency [12]. This suggests that the 2'-linked isomer is a substrate for the PheRS editing site, which is separated from the aminoacylation active site by about 40 Å [37]. In the Class I LeuRS that aminoacylates the 2'-OH, the 2'-linked, but not the 3'-linked AA-tRNA analog inhibits editing [38]. In YbaK, a trans-editor factor that hydrolyzes Cys-tRNA^{Pro} produced by the Class II ProRS (aminoacylates the 3'-OH), only the 3'-linked Cys-tRNA inhibits editing [13]. Misacylated tRNA may directly translocate from the active site to the editing site without leaving the AARS or being exposed to solvent to allow transacylation [35]. In this scenario it becomes important that the aminoacylation position on the tRNA is the same as the editing position, so that the mismatched AA-tRNA can directly enter the editing site for hydrolysis. Such a model needs to be tested in future studies.

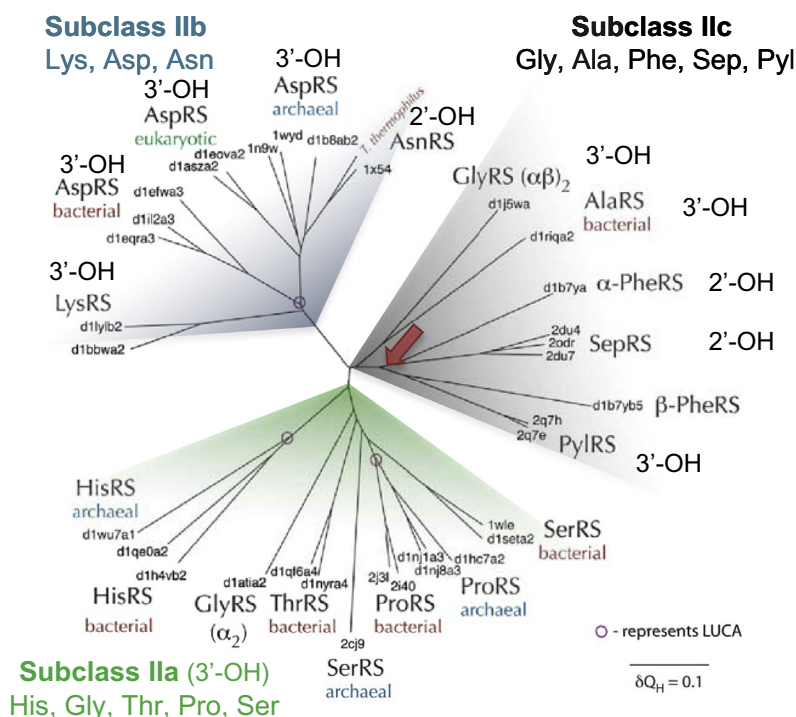


Fig. 3. The structure-based phylogenetic tree (calculated as in [28]) shows the evolutionary relationships between the class II AARS family and subclasses. The table of each aminoacyl-tRNA synthetase with its preference for the attachment of the amino acid to the 2'-OH or 3'-OH as compiled earlier [4] is combined with the experimentally determined specificity of PylRS and SepRS. Every member of the family directs aminoacylation to the 3'-OH of its cognate tRNA. PheRS, AsnRS, and SepRS are the only exceptions and preferentially aminoacylate the 2'-OH. The earliest point in evolution when the switch to 2'-OH preference occurred is indicated (red arrow).

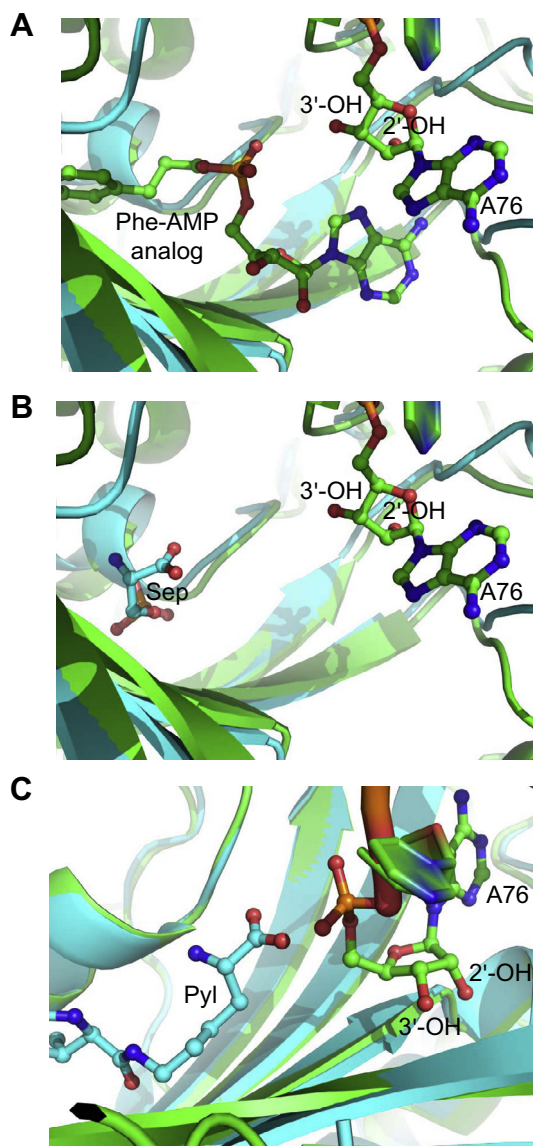


Fig. 4. Structural modeling of PheRS, SepRS, and PylRS aminoacylation active sites. (A and B) *A. fulgidus* SepRS structure complexed with Sep (cyan, PDB: 2DU3) is superimposed onto the structure of *T. thermophilus* PheRS:tRNA^{Phe}:Phe-AMP analog complex (green, PDB: 2IY5). (C) The structure of *Methanosarcina mazei* PylRS complexed with Pyl (cyan, PDB: 2ZCE) is superimposed onto the structure of *D. hafniense* PylRS:tRNA^{Pyl} complex (green, PDB: 2ZNI).

Acknowledgments

We thank Kelly Sheppard and Noah Reynolds for materials and discussion. This work was supported by grants from the Division of Chemical Sciences, Geosciences, and Biosciences, Office of Basic Energy Sciences of the U.S. Department of Energy (DE-FG02-98ER20311) for work on PylRS, the National Institute of General Medical Sciences (GM22854), and by the National Science Foundation (MCB-0950474).

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